XIX

Village Ghosts, Village Gods

An old woman sits in her village house and talks about birth and death, smiling as she tells her story.

A month after a child is born the family holds a feast for the newborn. If the child is a boy the family holds a feast during the next spring festival.

When a villager dies, everyone in Long Wan learns about it quickly. In the old days someone always seemed to be dying in the village, but now people live longer, she says.

When a family member dies, the family leaves the village to buy a coffin. It's usually a simple wooden coffin. The coffin is red with gold lettering on the outside.

The family places the corpse in the coffin and lets it lie in the house for a few days.

The family waits for close relatives to arrive before carrying the corpse out to the graveyard at the edge of the village.

Close relatives are expected to cry when the body is being buried; if they don't cry the deceased person's spirit will become angry and return to haunt the family.

Ghosts of the dead must be handled carefully; every effort must be made to appease their spirits; if their spirits aren't appeased they will return to disturb the family.

The body is washed and dressed in new clothes before burial. Men attending the funeral often wear white headbands; the women wear a piece of cloth called a ma.

After the burial the family and friends of the deceased return to the house for a dinner.

Twelve days after the burial the family holds a Zhao Ju, a ceremony in which a group of men chant words to calm the spirit of the deceased. Often only the old people of the village attend the Zhao Ju.

The young people don't think about death. It's the old people who feel close to it, she says.

During the Zhao Ju, family and friends weep once more for the deceased. After the ceremony, the family has another large dinner.

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In a clearing at the edge of the village rice paddies, a group of farmers stand outside a small brick house.

Firecrackers explode in the distance as they enter the simple one-room building. The house is dark and shadowy inside, lit only by candlelight.

The farmers approach the altar and place thimbles filled with rice and wine before statues of the village's ancestral gods.

The villagers light incense and candles and kowtow before the gods, praying for the well being of their families.

Today is Qing Ming, the day Chinese pay their respects to the dead. Many villagers have come to the temple to pray to the local gods, who represent the mythical parents of the village.

Statues of the gods — a man with a long flowing white beard and a woman dressed in long robes and a veil — stand at the center of the altar.

Chinese characters explain the origins of the ancestral gods — the village originally belonged to the goddess, who allowed the man to come to Long Wan to live with her, and all of the villagers are their children.

The villagers come and go quietly, their faces bathed in flickering candle light. The air is redolent of incense and burning wax.

The faces of the gods glow eerily in the wavering light as an elderly woman solemnly kowtows before the altar.

The farmers say they come to the temple — called the Happiness Kindness Hall — to pray for the health of their families or a rich rice and sugarcane harvest.

Some women pray to the local deities for help in conceiving a boy. Village women always feel pressure to conceive a boy child. The pressure is especially severe now because of the government's one-child-per-family birth-control policy.

On the temple walls the villagers hang small flags petitioning the village goddess for help in conceiving a son or thanking her for answering their prayers and having granted them one.

A small table has been set up on the grass in front of the temple for the food and beverages the villagers offer to the gods today.

It's early in the day but the table is already covered with a cooked duck, eggs, rice, rice wine, and tea.

After the villagers pray inside the darkened temple, they return to the yard to burn yellow paper money and light firecrackers. Plumes of smoke drift across the nearby fields.

In the grassy area outside the temple, a woman kowtows before a stone dog perched atop a high cone-shaped pedestal. The villagers say the dog protects village homes from evil intruders.

One woman kowtowing before the ancestral gods and the stone dog says she prays that her children will be healthy and that the family will have enough food.

A middle-aged woman says she prays that her son will pass the upcoming college entrance examination.

In times of trouble, she says, the farmers pray to the village gods and seek help from their ancestors.

Ancestral ghosts can have either a positive or negative effect on the living. If a family prays and offers symbolic gifts to the dead, the ancestors are more likely to bring good luck to the family.

Most of the farmers visiting the temple today are woman. The villagers say it's usually older people and women who pray to the deities and visit the village temples.

Those who worship generally visit the temples during important festivals such as Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, and Qing Ming.

Most of the younger villagers have little knowledge of religion. In the years following the communist revolution, religious practices were largely suppressed by the government, which considered religion a form of superstition.

Young people now are too preoccupied with doing business and earning money to pay much attention to religious ideas and rituals, the villagers say.

But they seem equally indifferent to the ideas of Mao Zedong, who is still viewed by many older villagers as a kind of deity.

Still, interest in the supernatural is unmistakable on days like Qing Ming when even children go out to the village cemetery to kowtow before the graves.

Translated as "clear bright," Qing Ming is one of the 24 climatic periods of the Chinese lunar calendar, which synchronizes village activities with the rhythms of nature.

Qing Ming is celebrated in early April when the weather changes from gray and rainy to bright and sunny.

It's also the time that the spring rice and sugarcane crops are planted.

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Village families move in single-file caravans across a freshly planted field, carrying baskets of food to the village graveyard.

Marching across the field, the villagers look like pilgrims journeying to a holy site.

By late morning families have begun to arrive at the graves scattered across a low circle of hills.

A small pool of water — a tradition in Chinese cemeteries — lies at the base of the hill.

When deciding on a burial site, the villagers consider the "feng shui" or "wind and water" condition of the location, believing that a grave overlooking water is propitious and that burying parents in a place with good "feng shui" will bring the family good fortune.

By late morning the graveyard has taken on an almost festive air. Families dot the hillside, gathered in small groups around the graves of their ancestors.

The elders of the family suspend long streams of red firecrackers from a stick before each grave. The firecrackers explode in a staccato fury of orange flame and smoke.

Two men from one family move from grave to grave hauling a roasted pig as an offering to their ancestors.

Small children watch in awe as the firecrackers explode across the hillside. Clouds of white smoke and the pungent smell of burning gunpowder fill the air.

Scattered among the villagers are people dressed in bright dresses and suits that seem out of place in the village.

Former villagers who live in the city now often return to the village on Qing Ming to pay their respects to deceased parents and grandparents.

In a crowded section of the cemetery, a family of seven brothers and cousins, most of whom are dressed in white shirts and black suits, move with their children from one family grave to another.

Like other villagers, they carry baskets filled with food and bright red packages of firecrackers.

Unlike some families, the Liang family tradition only allows males to visit the cemetery on Qing Ming.

If the women really want to participate they can, says one brother, but generally they have stayed home.

While some of the Liang family graves are marked by long cylindrical concrete tombs, most are simply mounds difficult for an untrained eye to identify as a grave.

When the Liang family arrives at an ancestral gravesite, one of the brothers goes off to collect clumps of earth to rebuild the mound.

Every year on Qing Ming the grave mound is rebuilt and swept as a gesture of respect for the deceased.

Not showing such respect is thought to bring bad luck to the living.

Once the grave mound has been rebuilt to make it more visible in the coming year, baskets of food are placed in front of it.

Today the Liangs have brought a whole cooked goose, rice balls, eggs, and rice wine as offerings.

After the rituals are performed, the family will consume the food.

As part of the ritual, one brother pours rice wine into a small hole dug in front of the grave while another lights small candles to help guide the spirits home again.

The family then burns symbolic paper in the form of money, clothing, gold, or houses.

The smoke carries the family's offerings to the ancestors, one brother says.

When the preliminary rituals have been completed, the family members kneel before the grave and whisper a private prayer to the dead. There is a moment of silence in the fields when the dead and the living meet.

Then a child hands a long strip of red firecrackers to an adult who suspends it from a stick and lights it in front of the grave.

The sound is deafening. Children hide behind adults or plug their ears as the graves dissolve in a swirl of thick white smoke.

For an instant the mystery and fear that only death inspires invades the hillside. A long drawn-out silence hovers over the land as the smoke swirls and slowly clears.

An unspoken moment of memory lingers as the family gathers up their baskets and moves down the hillside to the next grave.

It's the sound of the exploding firecrackers, they say, that sends the spirits of the dead back to the spirit world.

Although the villagers call on their ancestors to return to the graves to collect their offered gifts, the ritual ends by sending them back to the spirit world.

A ghost that follows them home has the potential to create mischief in the family, they say.

By the time the smoke has cleared, the Liang family has already moved on to the next grave. The one they just left belonged to their grandfather, one brother says, but the grave they stand before now belongs to an ancestor who lived maybe 300 years ago.

They don't know exactly who he is, he says, laughing. They only know he is their ancestor.

Most of the villagers visit the graveyard on Qing Ming, but not all of them are convinced of the existence of spirits.

Some believe, some don't, says one of the Liang brothers. But it doesn't matter if they believe or disbelieve, he adds. They visit the cemetery mostly to show respect for their ancestors.

Another villager says most of the members of his family are skeptical. They don't believe much in a supernatural world, he says. They visit the cemetery out of respect for the deceased members of their family— to remember them.

When people die, they just die, he says, smiling. They come to the graveyard to thank their ancestors for bringing them into the world, he says. If it weren't for them, none of us would be here today.

Today's farmers generally believe that a person's happiness depends mostly on himself, not on his ancestors, says another villager.

It has been a Chinese tradition to believe that a person's ancestors can help him through the trials of life, but many people no longer believe this.

Still, he adds, smiling, it's impossible to know for sure what happens to us when this life is over.

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In a shady place hidden by trees, an elderly woman on her way to the rice fields stops at a small house to leave burning incense.

The house, or lin pai, is one of the many one-room temples in Long Wan where villagers pray to their ancestors.

Dedicated to the ancestors of particular families, these temples are usually close to the family house and visited by family members on important holidays or the anniversary of a relative's death.

The villagers believe that the spirits of the dead will be drawn to these small houses where the deceased person's name has been written on a piece of wood or paper.

More modest versions of lin pai are the small shrines often found in Chinese homes and

businesses.

Some of the very old villagers, one woman explains, also turn to mediums to help them communicate with the spirits of dead relatives.

The living can communicate with the dead only on certain days of the month, the woman says. The third, sixth, and ninth days of the month are considered auspicious, she says.

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By the early 1990s, spiritual practices were fairly commonplace in the village. But during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Communist Party described religion as a form of superstition — a feudalistic practice that needed to be uprooted from China.

The Communist Party is more tolerant of religious practices today, but it continues to be wary. Certain "superstitious" practices are still prohibited by law and can lead to arrest. Party officials continue to urge people — especially other party members — not to practice religion.

But despite its well-publicized distaste for religion, the Party claims that Chinese law grants people religious freedom as long as their practices don't threaten the stability of the state.
In recent years, the people of Long Wan have gradually returned to the religious practices they knew for hundreds of years before the 1949 communist revolution.

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Hidden in a clump of trees on a hill overlooking the lowland fields stands the village's Buddhist temple.

Four golden Buddha statues stare down from the altar as a lone villager dressed in a black cape rings a bell and chants a Buddhist sutra.

Offerings of flowers and oranges decorate the altar and incense burns in a large vase.
About five years ago, the temple was built to replace one that had stood on the site for three or four hundred years.

The original temple had been closed and fell into disrepair during the Cultural Revolution.

The old monk was driven away and the villagers were forced to practice Buddhism secretly, says Guang Chi, the temple's principal monk.

The villagers say that it's generally the older people who practice Buddhism and visit the temple.

An elderly woman shelling freshly picked peanuts in front of a house not far from the temple is one of the village's more dedicated practitioners.

She says she visits the temple every day, in the morning and evening, to pray for good health.

She believes that practicing Buddhism will guide her to a better life after death. A good man will go to heaven after he dies, she says, but an evil man will not.

Xu Mei, a 39-year-old woman who is also a believer, says that lighting candles and incense and praying to the Buddha will bring God's blessings to her family.

On festival days her family goes to their old village house to pray before the Buddhist altar there. We pray for a good life in this world, she says.

What happens to people after death is impossible to know, she adds, only people who have died know where the dead have gone.

It is a Sunday afternoon and Guang Chi sits in a small dormitory room attached to the temple.

Dressed in the traditional gray robes worn by Chinese Buddhist monks, Guang Chi has a shaved head and stares with an eye strangely frozen in its socket — a glass eye.

His room is disorderly, with empty bottles stored under the bed, and books, teacups, and scraps of paper strewn across the dresser top.

He says the villagers have been allowed to openly practice Buddhism again only since 1978.

The local officials have good relations with the monks because the Communist Party used to hold meetings in the temple before the 1949 revolution, he says. This temple supported the Communist Party.

Guang Chi says he came to Long Wan five years ago to organize construction of the new temple.

He says about 100 villagers practice there now, with some visiting only during important village festivals such as Qing Ming and Spring Festival and others practicing with the monks three times a day— in the early morning, at noon, and in the evening.

Many Buddhist rituals resemble those performed to honor the village ancestral deities. Practitioners chant sutras, light incense, and ask the Buddha for help with the struggles of daily life.

Guang says he spends much of his time at the Buddhist temple in nearby Zhanjiang but also lives at the Long Wan temple.

He says the monks wake up at 4 a.m. to practice, which includes chanting, meditation, bell ringing, and drumming.

After a sunrise breakfast, the monks do farm work in the nearby fields, cultivating about 10 of the 50 mu of land controlled by the temple. We don't have enough workers, he says, so the crop isn't big enough to support us.

In addition to raising some of their own food, the monks accept donations of rice and money from the villagers, he says.

A monk since 1978, Guang says he initially learned about Buddhism from reading books. Without Buddhism, a man's life isn't much different than the life of an ant or animal—he lives, dies, and life is worth nothing, he says.

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A young man walks his bicycle down a shaded village path. It's late afternoon and the day's last light filters through the trees. A wooden crate filled with incense, candles, and yellow paper money is attached to the rear of his bicycle.

The merchant travels from village to village selling items used in religious rituals in the village's temples.

The peddler bangs a small tin drum as he moves down the village lanes. Women emerge from their homes and approach him as he passes by their courtyards.

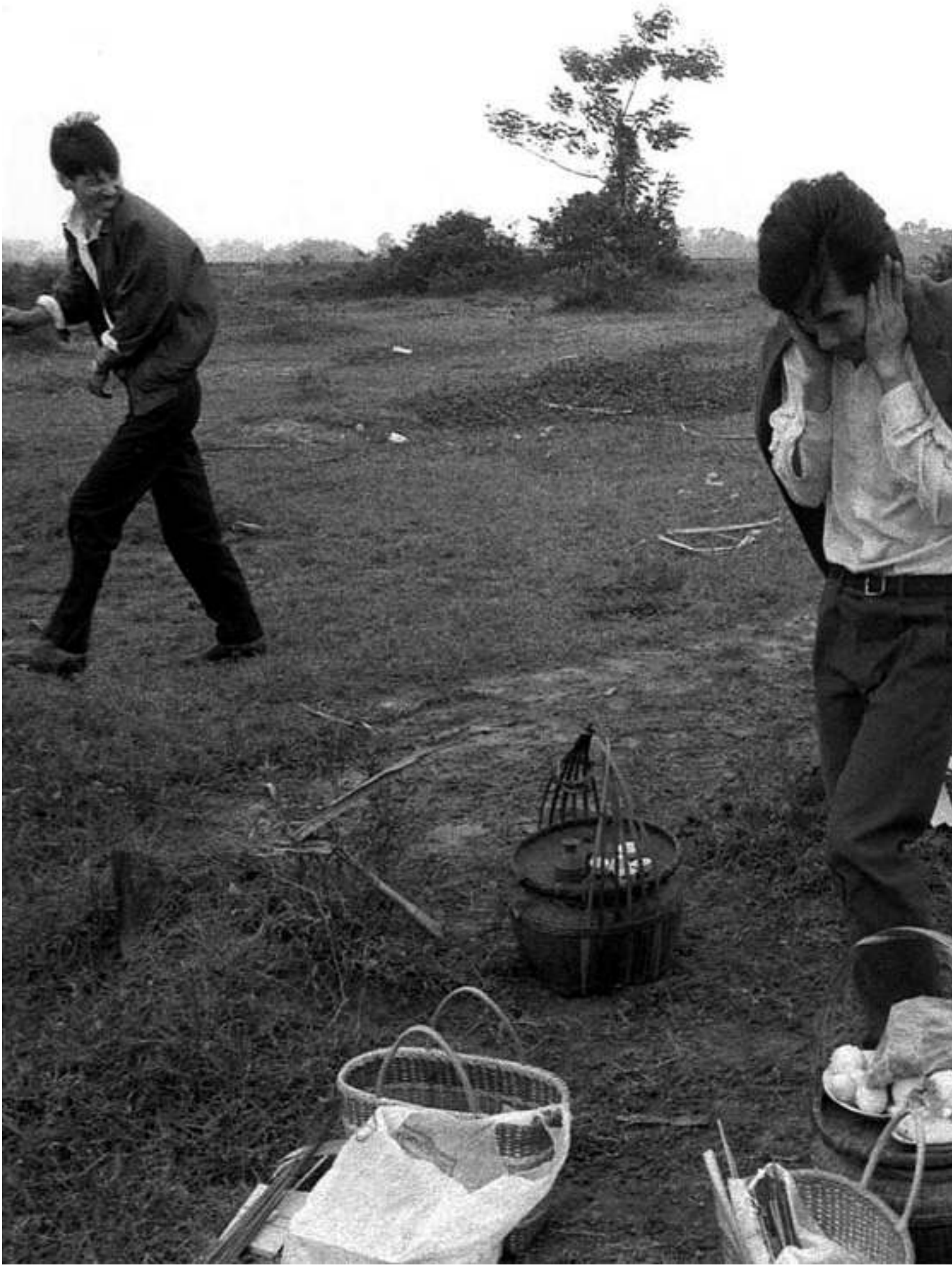
He sits on the ground and watches indifferently as they gather round his bicycle to inspect his goods.

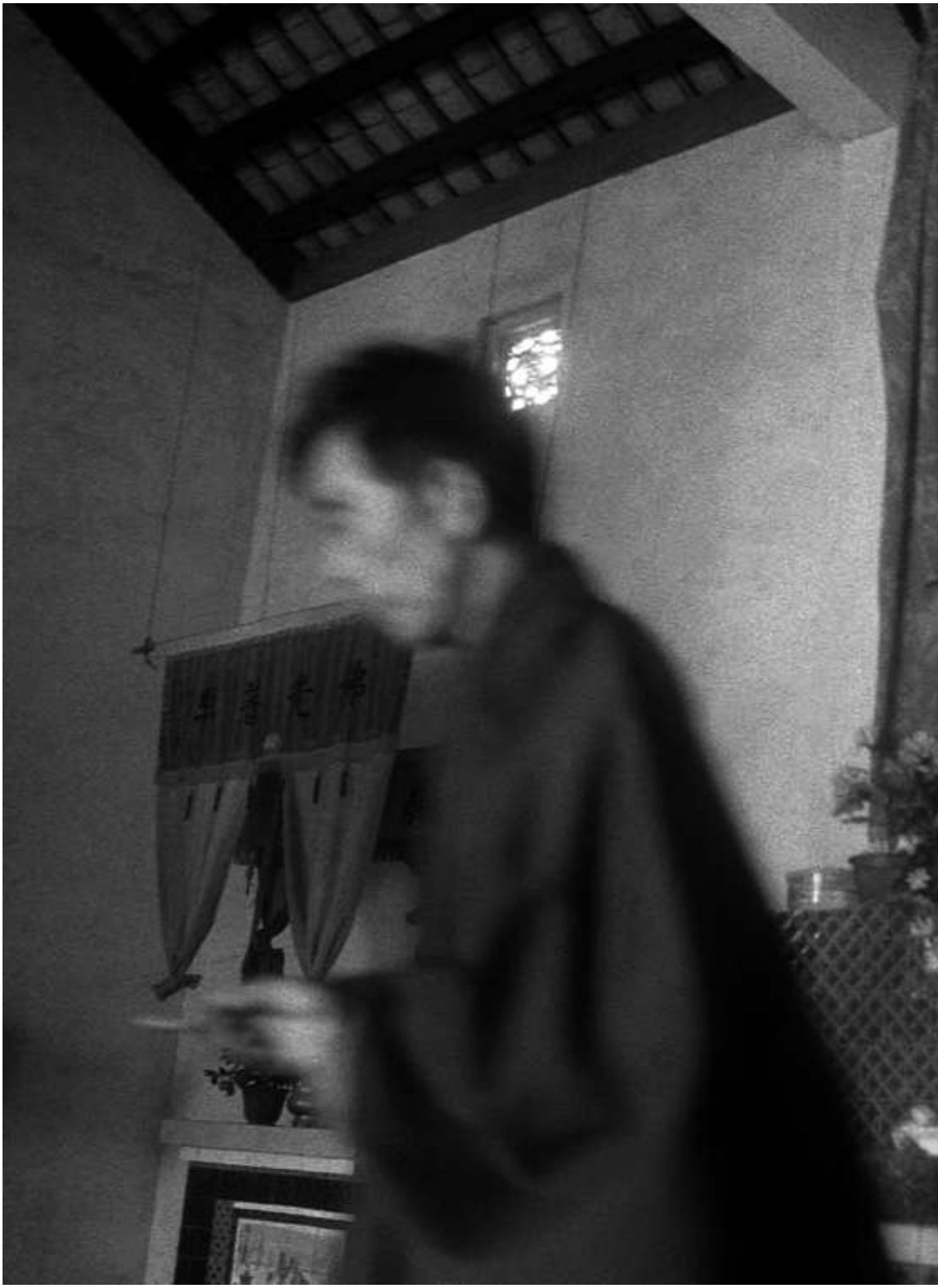
The young man hangs his head to one side as the women inspect his candles and incense; he seems bored with what he is doing, detached from the mournful rituals that fuel his trade.

His face is expressionless as the women complain that his prices are too high. They ask him to lower his price, but he seems unmoved by their complaints.

The old women slowly drift away, shuffling empty-handed down the muddy village lanes.

The young merchant lifts himself up from the ground and continues on his way, without saying a word to anyone.






宗恩潤澤垂千秋
宗教發達垂澤長
地雲人傑起龍文


祖德宗功
祖德光輝源流遠
祖德流芳昌萬世

XX

Return: November 2000

I speed down the highway on the back of H's motorcycle. The nylon jacket he lent me flaps and balloons wildly in the wind.

I tell H how to get to the village but I'm not sure I know the way myself now. It's been nine years since I last visited Long Wan, and much has changed since then.

Rows of new three- and four-story office buildings have sprung up along the road to the village, replacing what used to be village fields.

I spot a familiar landmark, a viaduct snaking through the fields, and know we are at least going in the right direction. I look for the turnoff to the village but I don't see it anywhere.

H pulls to a stop in front of a roadside stand and asks the woman behind the counter for help.

Long Wan is a little farther down the road, she says, there's a turnoff up ahead, a gate on the left.

We stop at an arched gateway by the side of the road and a man there says Long Wan is just a short distance down the road beyond the gate.

We pass what looks like Mao Village, the site of the Xiang, and ride past new two- and three-story houses.

I see a shop by the side of the road and tell H I want to stop to see what they are selling inside.

A huge poster of two lovers embracing hangs on the wall behind the counter.

Ten years ago there wasn't a shop here and if there were the owner wouldn't have dared place such a poster on the wall.

I ask the man behind the counter in Mandarin if Long Wan is nearby, but he doesn't seem to understand my question.

I ask him about his shop and he says he just opened it. He says the building was only recently built.

The shop owner is well groomed and his shop is clean and bright.

I see right away how the countryside is changing - how the city is slowly closing in on it.

The new houses we pass are light and airy, enclosed by high walls. The people are better dressed than they were a decade ago.

I keep looking at the fields we're passing, looking for a familiar landmark. We approach a traditional village gate, and I ask H to stop.

He asks me if this is Long Wan and I tell him I don't think so. Long Wan didn't have a village gate like this one, I say.

That man back there said this is Long Wan, H says, so this must be it.

The building on the other side of the gate doesn't look familiar, I say.

H approaches a group of men talking inside the gate. I scan faces and buildings but nothing I see looks familiar.

Then I turn and am suddenly face to face with a very old hunched back man. He stares at me intently.

He walks with a cane and is dressed in an updated version of a Mao cap. He looks familiar, like someone I photographed before.

He stares at me with a wild light shining in his eyes…he looks at me as if he has just seen a ghost.

He knows who I am…it has been almost a decade but how many foreigners have visited

Long Wan?

H goes over to speak with him. The old man continues to look at me as he speaks. He says he knows you, H says, he says you used to come here many years ago.

Then it all comes back to me…I remember the day I photographed him. It was late in the afternoon and he was walking his bicycle down a village lane.

He wore a Mao cap back then too - a Mao cap and a long overcoat. His brother was Liang Ni Fen who lived alone in the house filled with birds.

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I look down the lane beyond the gate and the layout of the village slowly falls back into place.

The old village school is still standing to the right of the new building but it looks much shabbier than before.

I ask an old man walking past me about the new building standing beside it - a two-story building with what looks like a small tower running up the facade. That's the new village school, he says.

I see several women moving around inside the building. They look more professional than the teachers who taught in the old village school.

I start to walk through the door but a woman stops me and warily asks me who I am looking for.

I explain that I used to come to Long Wan many years ago to photograph the villagers. Back then I took photos of the students and teachers inside the old school, I say. Would it be possible for me to take photos inside the new school as well?

She calls a woman to the door who I think must be the head teacher. I explain to her that I have been here many times before and that people in the village know me.

I explain that I am making a record of the village and ask if I can take photos of the students inside the new school.

She says I can't take photos inside the school. Taking photographs is not allowed without special permission, she says. The Education Department has rules that we are required to follow.

Her face is stern. Her words are stern. She walks away without further discussion.

I continue down the path. The old village store that used to be in a shabby building near the old school is no longer there.

The lanes are still muddy and the animals still wander along them but there are more chickens and pigs wandering along the paths than in the past.

I can tell right away that the village is richer than it used to be. In addition to the new village gate and school there are many new houses scattered along the lanes.

The people are better dressed ¾ a decade ago everyone wore patched and worn-out clothing, but now many people ¾ especially the young people ¾ are wearing brightly colored shirts, stylish slacks, T-shirts with images printed on the front.

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We approach the village's new ancestral temple. It's larger than the old temple that was here nine years ago. Many people are gathered outside it.

An old man waves us away as we approach the entrance. He seems angry and warns us not to come any closer.

I ask H why he is waving us off. In the past the villagers always let me visit the ancestral temple, I say.

H explains to the man that I would like to see the temple, but the old man says he doesn't want us to come any closer.

Today the new temple is being dedicated and only villagers are allowed inside, he says.

H says the old man thinks we have come from the central government to spy on them.

The government still frowns on religious expression, and the old man must think the government will criticize them for building the new temple.

I decide not to go any further. The old man is angry. He sees my camera and doesn't want me to take photos.

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We move deeper into the village. An older man wearing a cap invites me into his courtyard. He says he remembers me from the past though I only vaguely remember him.

He says the village is more prosperous than it was 10 years ago. More people have their own businesses or work outside, he says.

His sons are doing well with their businesses, raising chickens and pigs and selling them in the Xuexi city market.

He says the villagers raised the money to build the new school, collecting contributions from each family to help pay for it.

The new school includes an elementary school and a junior middle school, he says. It's much nicer than the old village school, he says.

His teenage grandson sits beside him dressed in a stylish T-shirt with a cartoon printed on the front. The boy looks and acts like a city boy.

He asks me where I come from and I tell him the United States. He says he would like to go to America someday.

America is very rich, he says, someday I would like to live in a rich country like America.

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I continue down the lane. I pass a courtyard and see a familiar face. It's Liang Shou Nan, a villager I often spoke with in the past.

He recognizes me and invites me into his courtyard to speak with him.

Dressed in an official uniform, he explains that he works for the government in Zhanjiang now.

Are you still living in Zhanjiang? he asks. You haven't been here for a long time.

I tell him I live in the United States now and that I have just returned for a visit.

Lian Shou Nan says he spends most of his time in Zhanjiang now, working only part time as a farmer in Long Wan

There have been many changes in the village since you were last here, he says. There’s a new

water tower, a new ancestral temple, and a new Buddhist temple.

Many people can afford to build new houses, he says. Some of the houses are very big.

I tell him that I saw them along the road as I entered the village.

He says many people work outside the village now though the farming money is better than before - good enough to justify working as a farmer, at least part of the time.

Many of the villagers earn money raising water buffalo, chickens, and pigs, he says. Some buy products in the north and sell them in Zhanjiang; others buy bananas and oranges in the south and sell them in the north. Some have gone north to find work.

Many of Long Wan's young people leave the village to work in the cities now, he says. Some have started their own businesses there.

They go to Zhanjiang or Guangzhou to work as cooks. Some learn technical skills that make it easier for them to find work and live in the cities.

The young women are also leaving the village to find work in the cities, he says.

Many of the young people only return to Zhanjiang to celebrate their parents' birthdays or Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival, he says. Many have returned to the village today to celebrate the dedication of the new temple.

The young people may not come back often but it's not because they don't want to, he says. They are just too busy working, earning money for life. At least they return for the festivals, he says.

Liang says he has three sons ¾ one works for the Zhanjiang government and the others have small businesses.

These days the old men and women do most of the day-to-day farm work, he says.

Farming is more profitable now because the government has given the villagers larger plots to cultivate, he says. This makes it possible for them to grow more food and earn more money.

In the past the village was very, very poor but the government over time has adjusted its policy and now life in Long Wan is improving, he says.

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A group of men walk along a village lane. They have returned to the village today to attend the dedication of the new ancestral temple.

Chen Shui Feng says he works about four days a month in a sugarcane factory in Xuexi County. Chen is not the first person I've met today who works in the sugarcane factory. They villagers say that sugarcane is the most important cash crop for the farmers now.

Chen says he prefers to work outside Long Wan because the money is better there.

He earns between 100 and 200 yuan a month working outside. He says he can't make that kind of money working as a farmer in the village.

But it's not always easy to find work outside, he says, there are too many people chasing too few jobs.

He says when he's not working outside the village he returns to Long Wan to help his family with the farm work.

Working in the village at least allows him to grow enough rice for daily life, he says.

Chen says his family produces about 1,600 jin of rice on his land now and could produce more if they wanted to.

He says 1,600 jin isn't enough to sell in the market but is enough to live on.

He says his life is a little hard right now but he doesn't want to complain about it either.

Liang Xian Jing, who accompanies him, has also returned to the village for the temple dedication.

Like his friend he spends most of his time working at the sugarcane factory in Xuexi County. But he says that his pay - 1,000 yuan a month - is much higher than his friend's. He says he also has a business raising chickens and fish.

His friends joke that he is a little bit rich now. Look at his potbelly, they say, a belly like that is the sign of a rich man.

They all laugh, and Liang Xian Jing laughs with them. He doesn't get upset when they joke about his potbelly. He seems proud that his friends consider him rich now.

He says his mother still lives here in the village but his brothers live with him in the city now.

In the past, he served as a soldier in the People's Liberation Army, which made it easier for him find a job in the sugarcane factory, he says.

Many Chinese say that former soldiers have an easier time finding a job after they leave the service. The authorities, they say, give them preference when filling jobs.

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I hike up a hill at the edge of the lowland fields and follow the path through the fields.

I walk in circles under the high-noon sun until a farmer finally shows me the way to the village's Buddhist temple.

There are two temples on the site now: a new one with an elaborate door and the old one-room temple that I visited the last time I was here.

I try to enter the new temple but the door is locked. I look inside and see that it's still unfinished.

I enter the old temple and find two men kowtowing before the altar. One is dressed like a city person in a white shirt and slacks, the other like a farmer in work clothes and a straw hat.

I ask them about the new temple and they say a wealthy person from Hong Kong contributed money to build it.

I ask if I can photograph them inside the temple and they say, no, they don't want me to photograph them inside the temple but outside the temple would be fine.

We find a shady place under a tree to take their picture. The man dressed in the white shirt smiles but the farmer wearing work clothes gazes sad-eyed out at the camera, folding his hands in prayer as I snap.

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The high-noon sun shines fiercely. The day grows hotter and the roads more dusty. No one moves along the paths or works in the fields.

I look down into a valley and see a water buffalo staring up at me. The animal watches me so intensely from a distance that I think even it must know I am a foreigner.

I follow a muddy path that I think leads back to the village center. I lose my balance and slip almost ankle-deep in the muck.

I continue down the path, eventually finding the road that leads back to the lowland fields.

I cross the fields and follow a lane through the center of the village. People wave to me as I pass their courtyards.

I meet a group of villagers gathered around a table to inspect the herbs a traveling salesman is offering for sale.

I see Liang Nu Li, a farmer I interviewed years ago. He looks almost the same as before but

moves more slowly now.

He smiles when he sees me. He must remember the afternoon we spent together at his house a decade ago.

I say hello and snap his photo standing with a group of people.

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I sit with a village family in a courtyard shaded by small trees. Shadows float across the yard and faces.

It's the kind of warm floating day I woke up to my first day in Zhanjiang in 1989.

Much of my time in Long Wan over the years has been spent sitting in courtyards like this, listening to stories.

This is the good life for the villagers, the best side of village life, sitting in the courtyard with members of the family together again.

A middle-aged son who works in Zhanjiang has returned with his son to spend the day with his father.

Dressed like a city boy in shorts and T-shirt, the grandson has the look of a future China, the face of a Long Wan that didn't exist when I first came here.

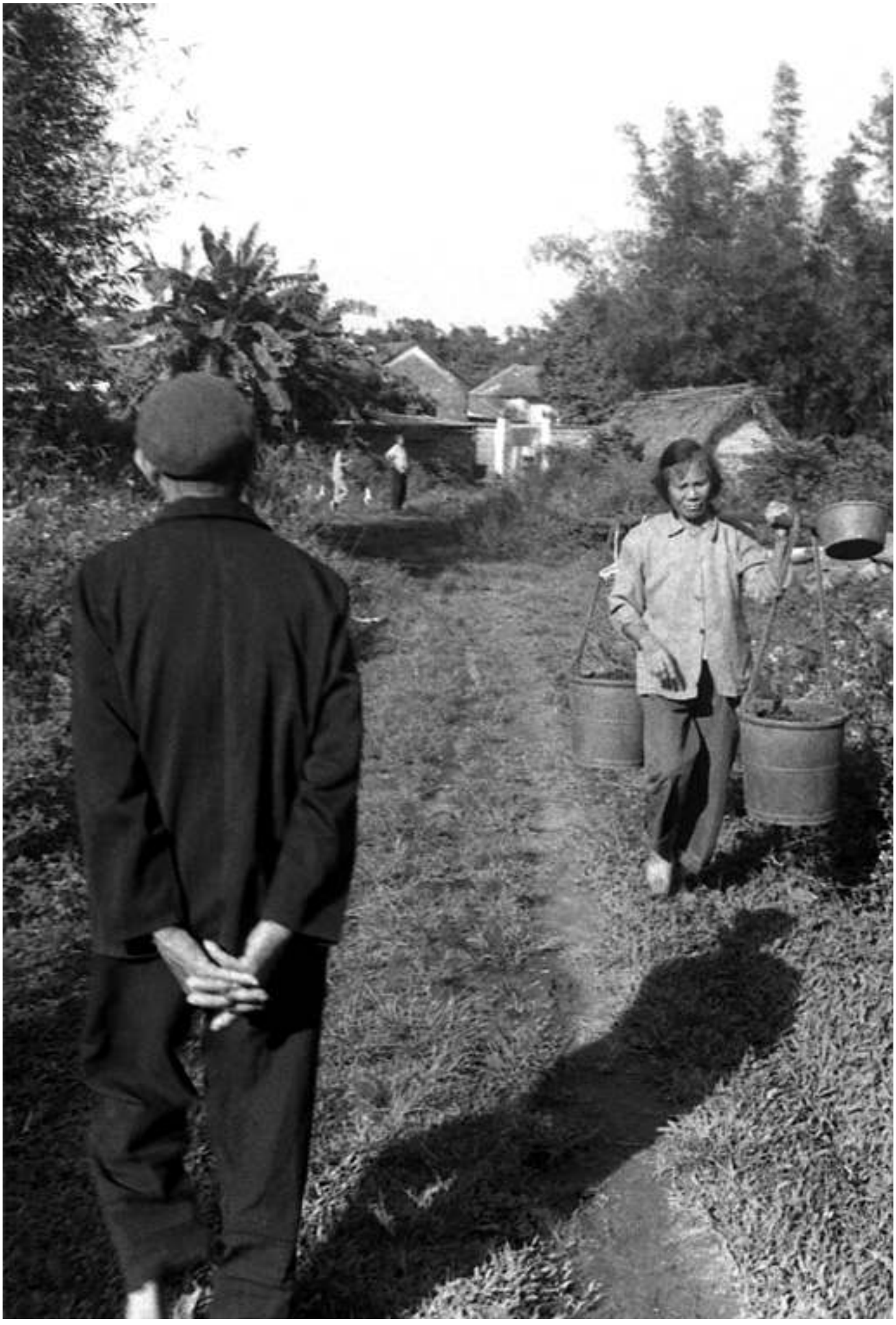
The village houses look brighter, cleaner and less crowded than they did a decade ago.

The village feels more like a refuge now, a quiet place close to nature, a retreat from the anxieties of city life.

In many ways life is looking up for the people of Long Wan. Money is flowing into the village from the towns and cities where village young people are working now.

But progress in the Chinese countryside remains painstakingly slow.

For the young people, life is elsewhere now - in the larger world outside, in distant cities where a different kind of life awaits them.

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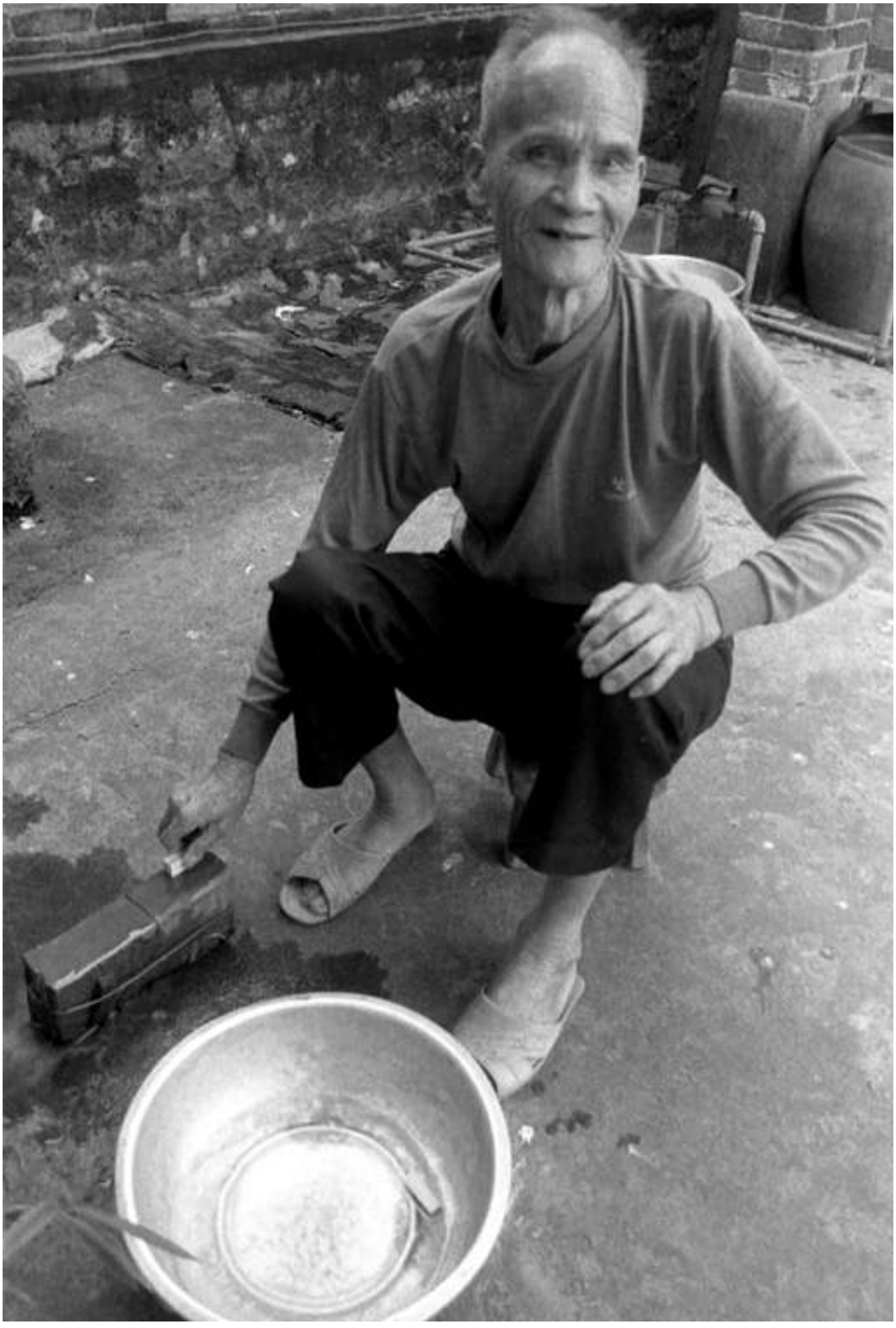


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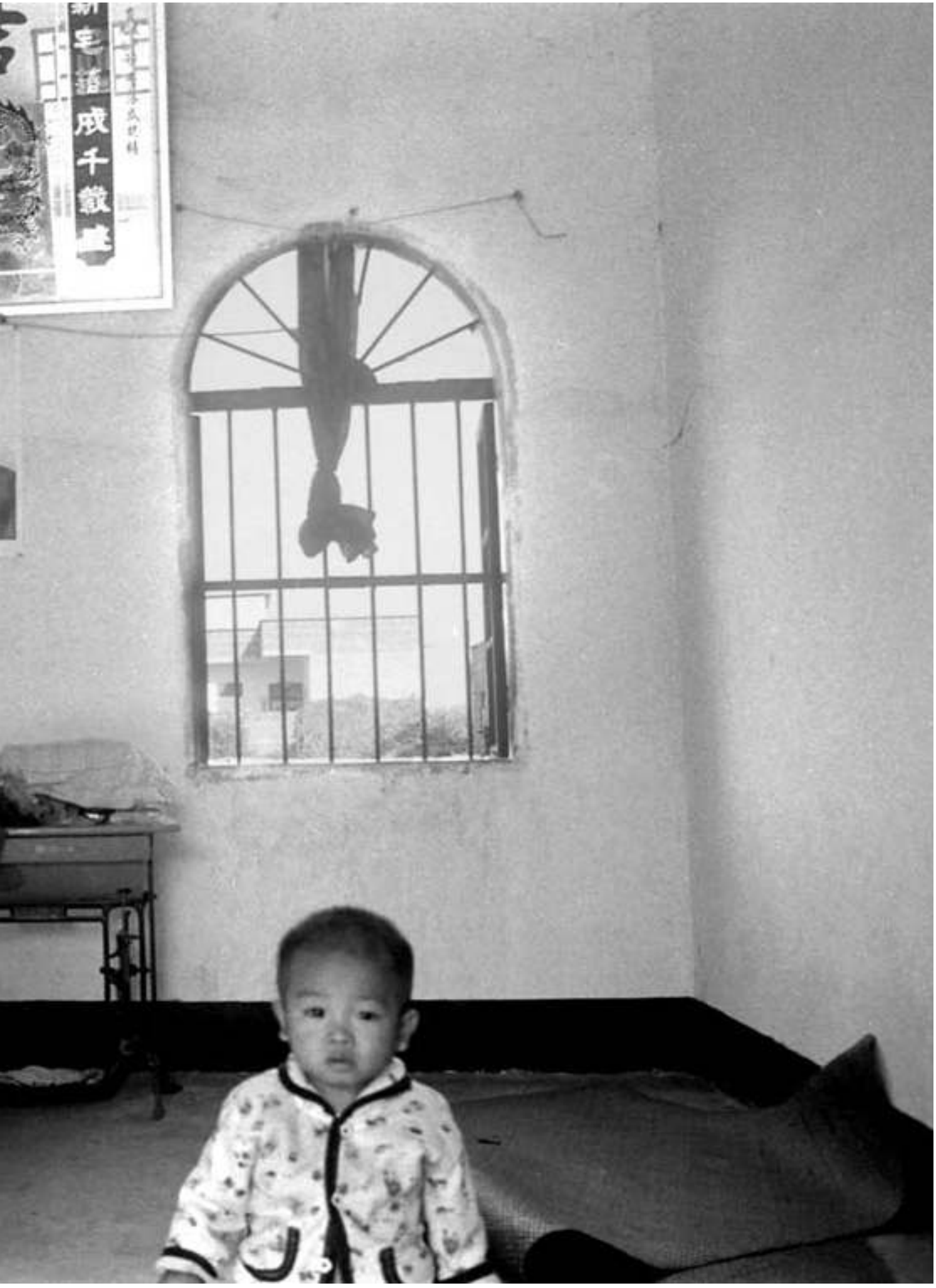
成千教士


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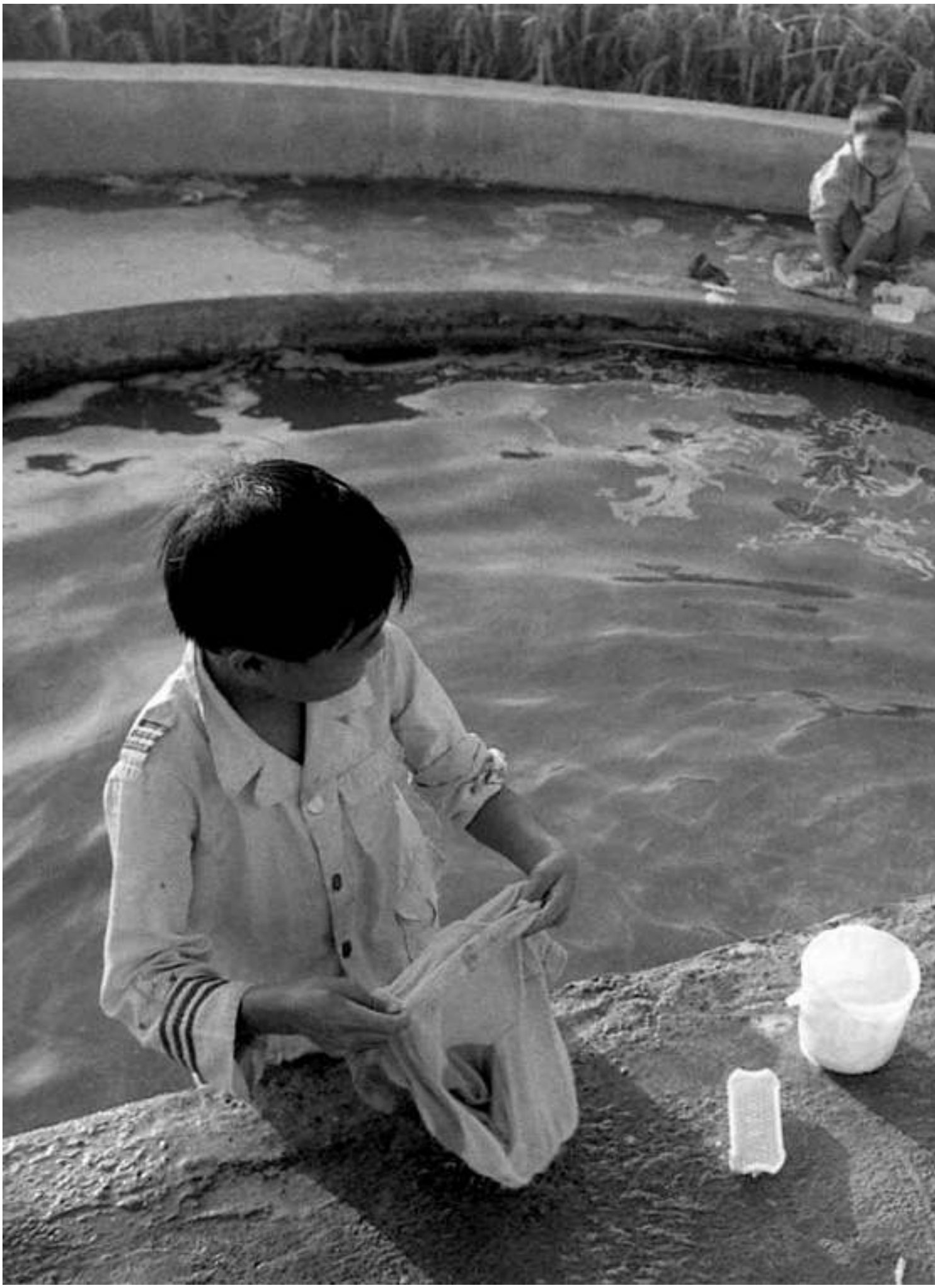
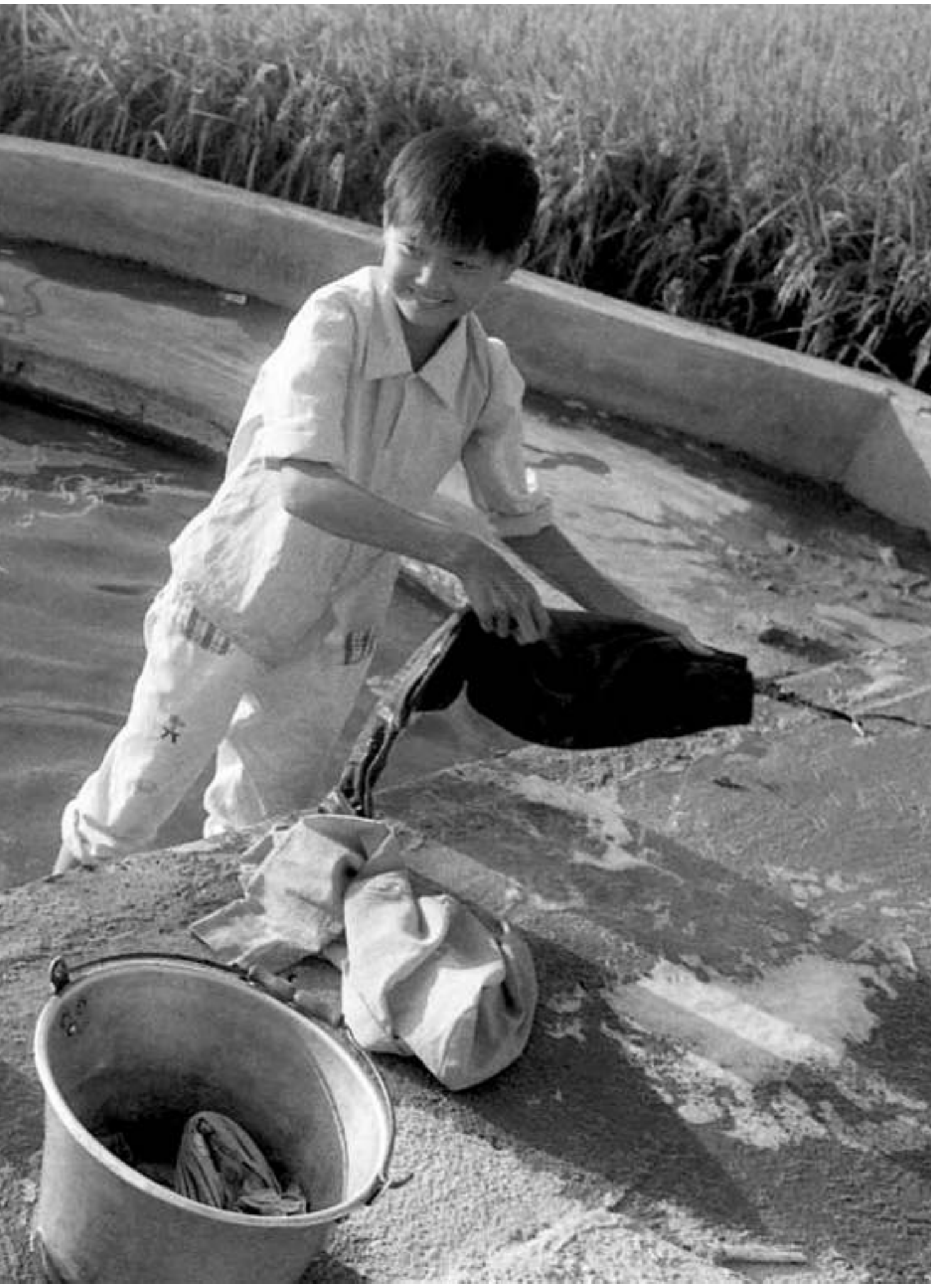
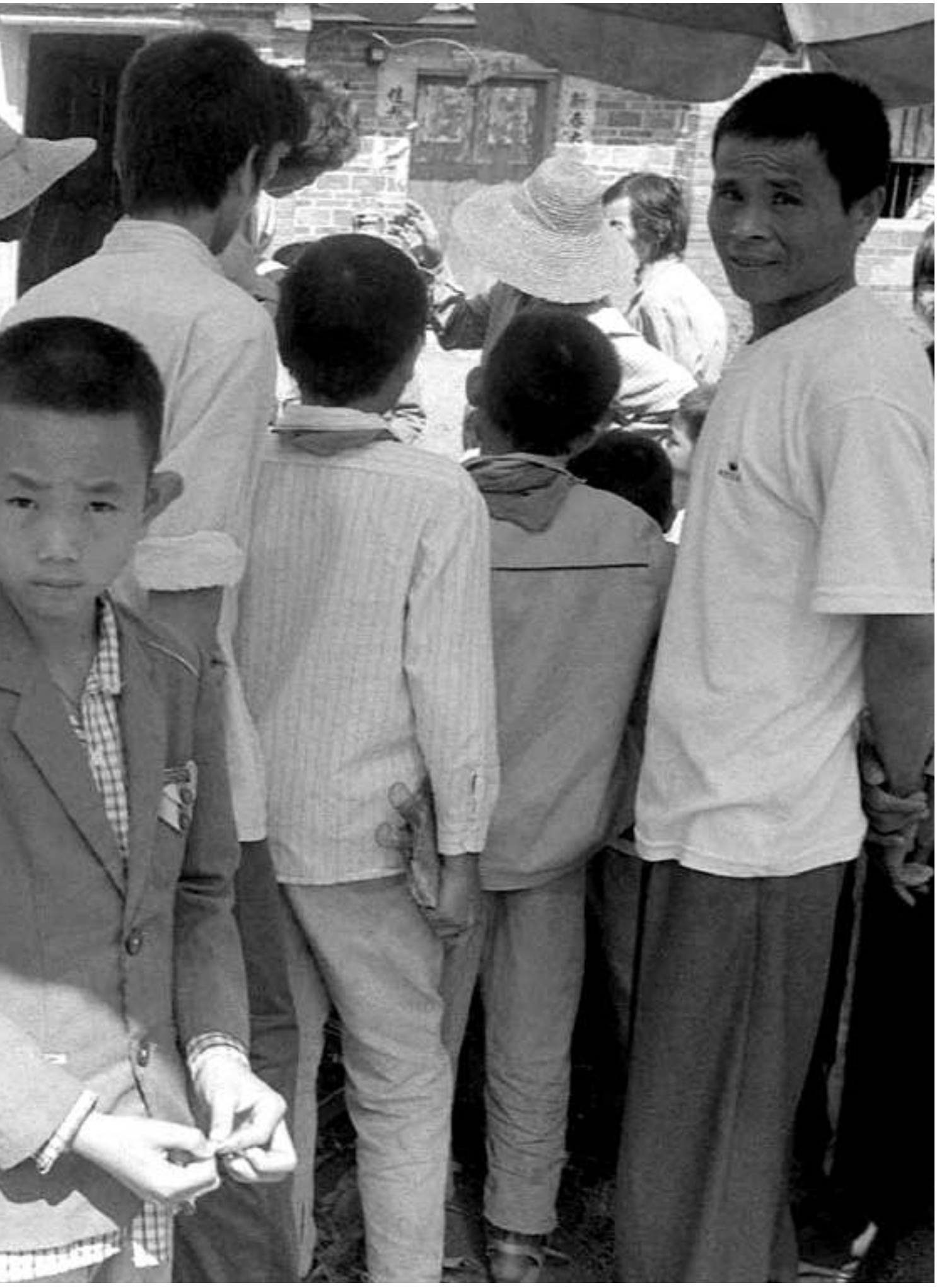
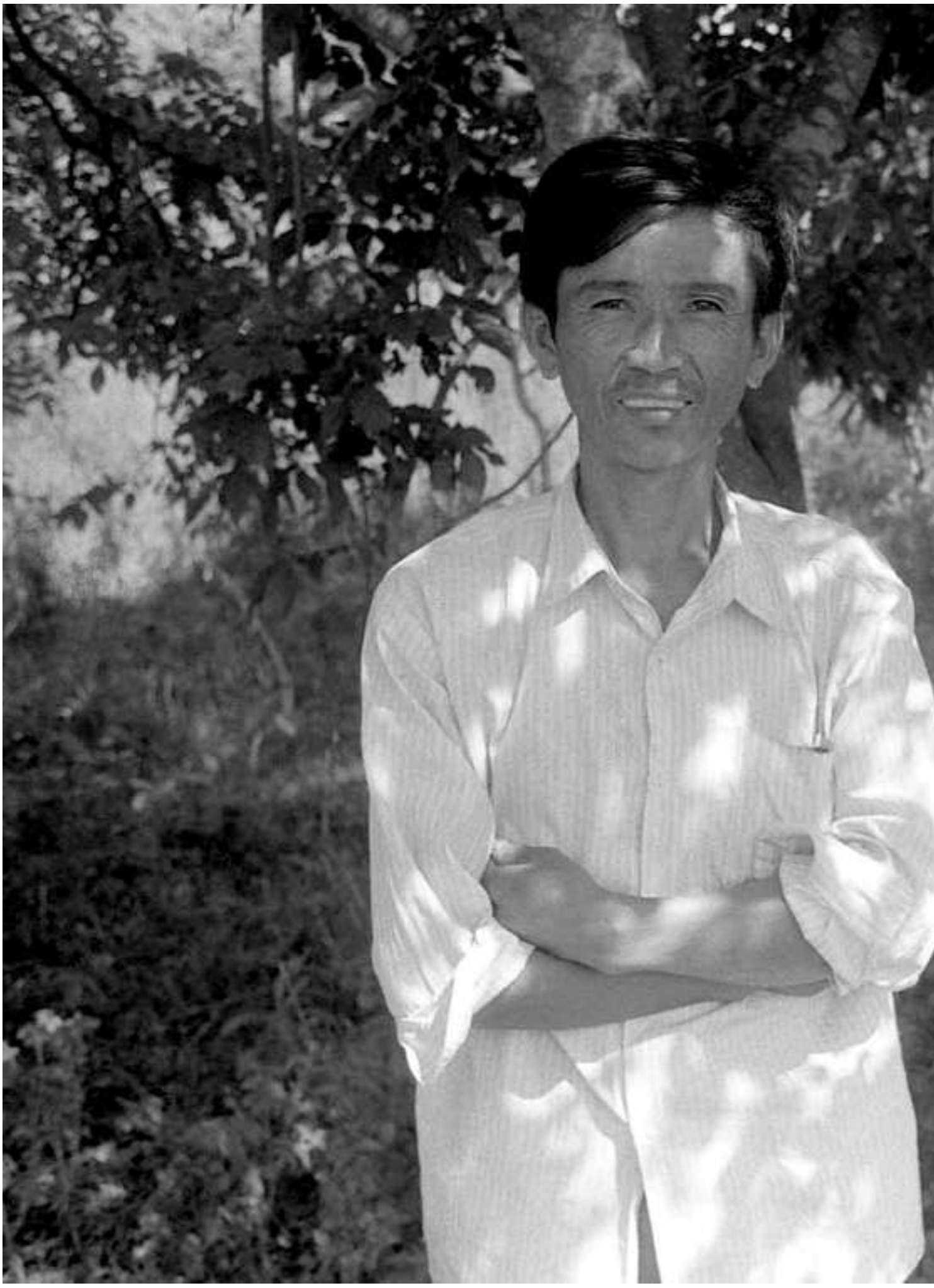
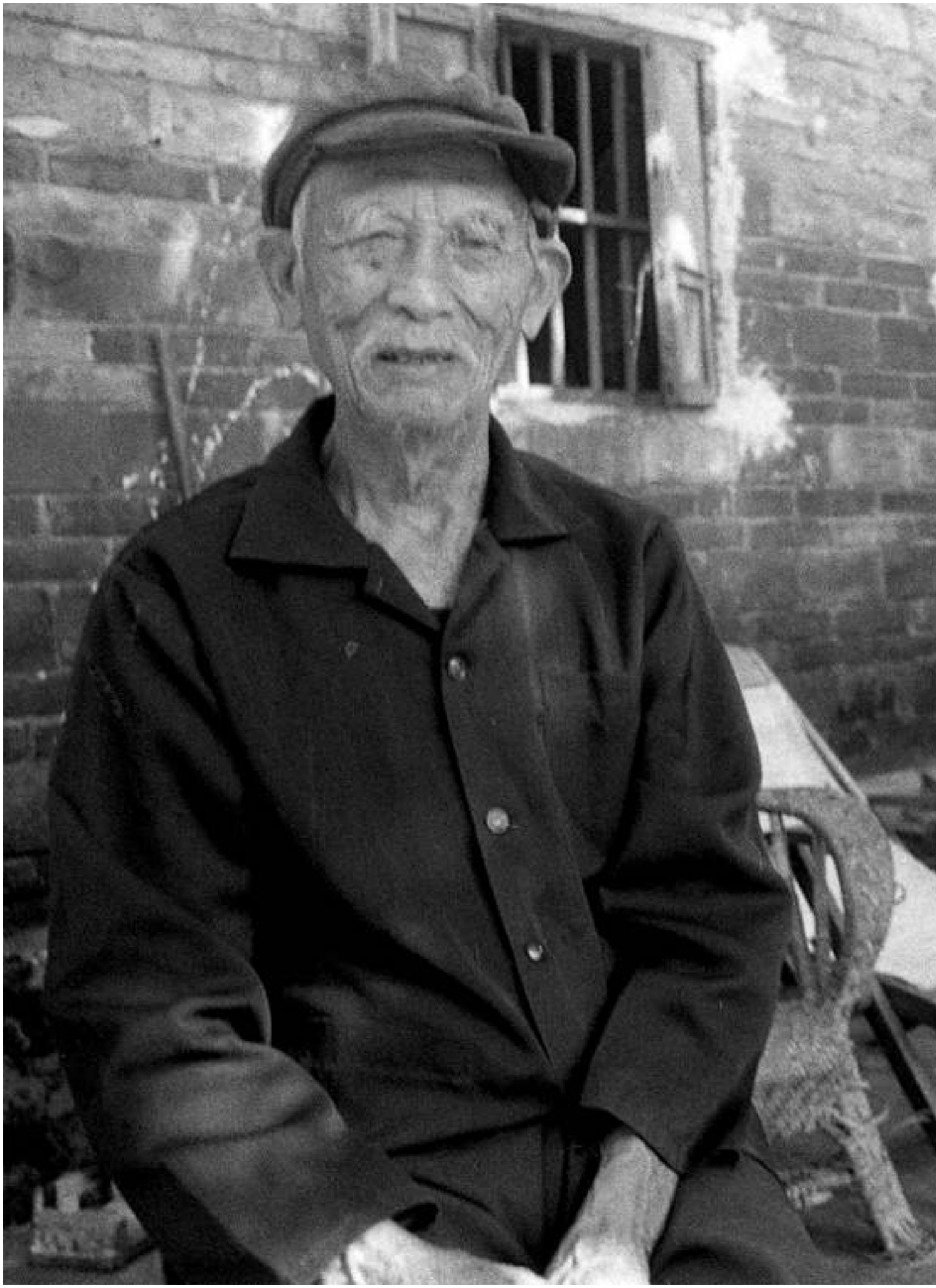
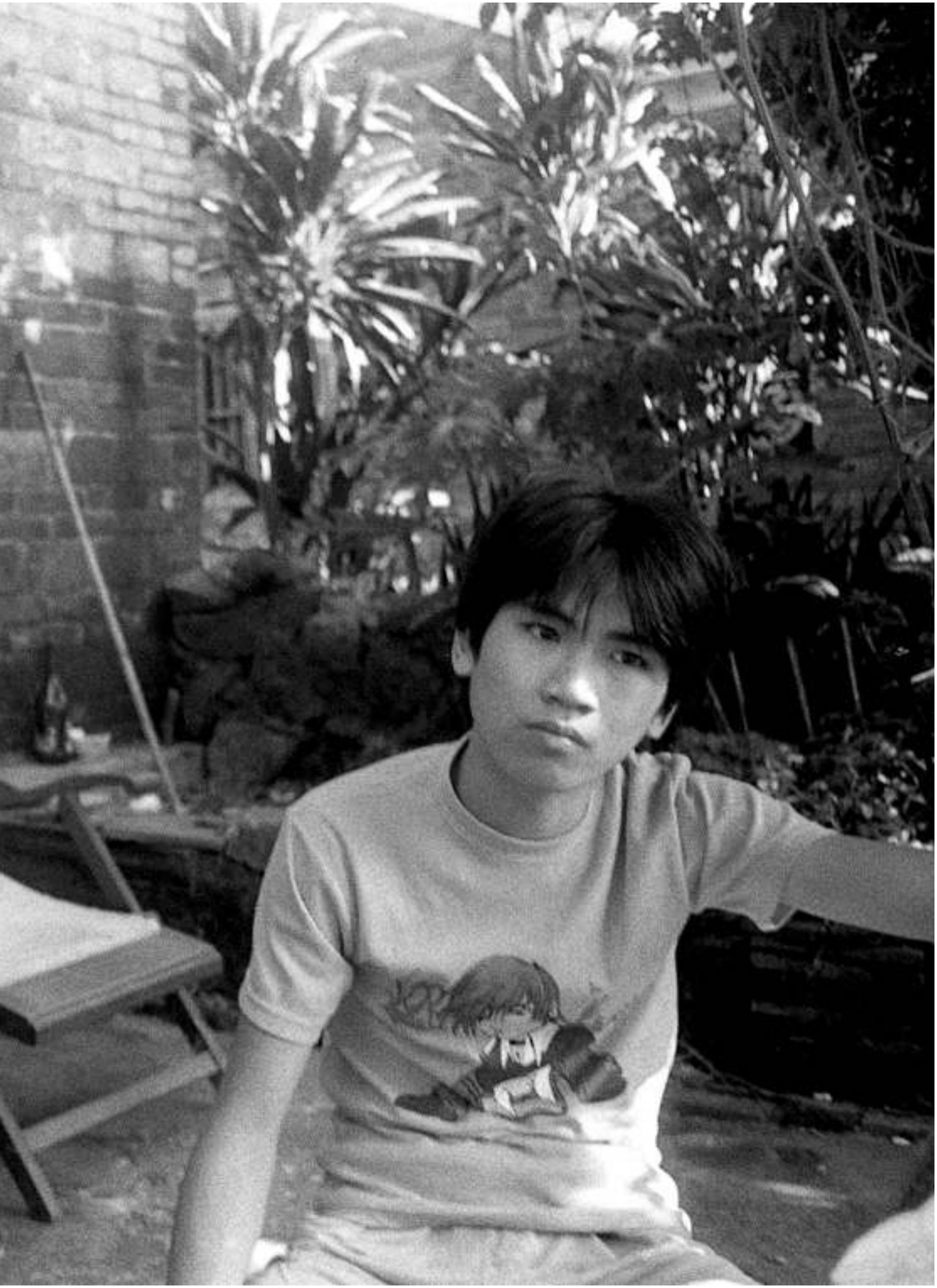












XXI

2005: Typhoon

A typhoon arrives the night I return to Zhanjiang in September 2005. By morning the storm has subsided and I borrow a battered old bicycle and set out for Long Wan.

It has been five years since I last visited the village.

The weather is still unstable but I decide to go to the village anyway since I will only be in Zhanjiang for a few days.

I ride my bicycle out of the city and down the road to Mah Jong. Halfway to the village, clouds gather in the distance and the wind picks up again.

The palm trees start to sway wildly in the wind and the sky grows darker. The typhoon is somehow reviving.

I take out a bottle of water and take a sip. A gust of wind blows the cap out of my hand and sends it tripping across the roadway.

I get off my bike and try to chase down the cap but the wind is too strong and the cap is blown away.

I look behind me and see my bicycle toppling over. The wind nearly blows me down as I struggle to pick it up.

The wind blows so hard now it sucks the water out of the bottle and soaks my shirt. It rips the camera bag out of my hand and blows off my hat.

I struggle to get control of the bag and put it more securely around my shoulder. Only a string around my neck keeps my hat from blowing away.

People in a nearby restaurant laugh at me as I struggle against the wind. They laugh a little harder because I am a foreigner.

The wind blows even fiercer than before. A heavy rain starts to fall and the streets flood.

I drag myself to a storefront restaurant. The wind lifts and topples a pedicab passing in front of the building.

Everyone runs for shelter to escape from the driving wind and rain.

I stand inside the restaurant and wait for the wind and rain to stop. I realize the weather is too volatile to continue on to the village today.

When the rain and wind subside I get back on my bike and ride back to Zhanjiang.

*

I set out the next day for Long Wan, this time riding in the back seat of H's company car.

When I was here five years ago he was riding a motorcycle but this time he is driving a car. J, a friend of mine from the past, sits in the passenger seat beside him.

H puts a CD into the stereo and turns it up loud. Scarborough Fair by Simon and Garfunkle and Hotel California by the Eagles play on the stereo.

It feels strange to be riding through the cane fields listening to Hotel California blasting on the stereo.

The deep past converges with the present as I float through the Chinese countryside.

We park the car and pass through the village gate. A huge new stage and a basketball court have been built beside the village school.

Every time I return to the village now I find a new project has been completed. Money continues to flow into the village from outside and the villagers are using it to improve their lives.

The last time I visited they had built a new school and village gate; this time there's new opera stage and basketball court.

I photograph a group of young people standing on the stage - members of a traveling show scheduled to perform on the stage today.

I don't see any familiar faces among them. Much time has passed since I first came here in 1990 and the faces have changed.

Many of the people who knew me have died or left the village to live with their children in the city.

The children I photographed in 1990 are grown up now and hard for me to recognize as adults.

The village is much quieter than I remember it. Only young women, children, and elderly men and women walk the lanes now.

An elderly woman and man invite me into their courtyard. The man appears to be recovering from an illness.

An empty wheelchair - the first I have ever seen in the village - stands under a tree behind him.

I realize I photographed the man standing on a village lane during Spring Festival in 1991. Dressed in a patched suit coat, he smiled brightly for the camera.

The woman says she remembers me from many years ago and even spoke to me in the past.

She says she has three sons and three daughters, all of whom live outside the village now.

Her eldest son is 35 and works in a sugarcane refinery in Xuexi; her youngest son works in a printing factory in Zhanjiang; and her middle son works in a shipyard in Guangzhou.

She says one of her sons went to college and was assigned a job after graduation.

She says life in the village is improving but Long Wan still has a long way to go. The farmers have better farming techniques now, better seeds and fertilizer, she says.

Agricultural science has helped the villagers improve their yields, she says.

*

I continue down the path but most of the courtyards are deserted. I take photos of fragments - windows and doorways, village lanes, water buffalo looking out at me.

I want to visit the village's ancestral temple, but J doesn't feel comfortable going there.

He says we have to be careful about entering village temples if the villagers don't want us to go there.

He must worry that bad luck will follow him if he goes against the wishes of the villagers and visits the temple without their consent.

We walk through the lowland fields. A new pagoda and pavilion is visible in the distance.

In the past the view from the lowland fields was of rice paddies stretched all the way to the horizon but now the city and its needs encroach more forcefully on the village.

I ask a passing farmer what it is and he says it's a new cemetery for the city of Zhanjiang. Big bulky construction trucks rumble down a newly paved road that runs to the cemetery.

A light rain starts to fall and my friends seem anxious to leave. I climb back into the car with them.

We speed through the cane fields with Hotel California still playing on the stereo.

*

I leave the apartment early the next morning and set out on my bicycle for Long Wan. I have a premonition that this will be my last trip to the village. I feel no pressure this time to find anything in particular. I will let the day take me wherever it will.

I pedal calmly through the morning light. When I lived here in the 1990s I used to get tired pedaling up the hills, but today I feel I could pedal for hours.

It's the first sunny day I've had since I arrived here. The typhoon has subsided completely and the sky is calm, clear blue and cloudless.

I pass the entrance to a new freeway and look for the road that weaves through the countryside.

In 1989 the freeway didn't exist. The city continues to expand into the countryside. Factories, offices, highways, and a new city cemetery encroach on the village.

I ride along the quiet country road that cuts through the fields. Sugarcane rustles in the breeze. Long-tailed birds dart across the fields.

I ride through Mao village, which is bustling with activity today. Men sit at small tables smoking water pipes and playing Chinese checkers. One man sits on the ground and stitches on a sewing machine.

Children call out to me mei-ge-lao mei-ge-lao (American ghost) as I pass.

I ride into Long Wan and park my bike next to the opera stage. The same young people I saw yesterday are standing on the stage. I ask them if I can take their picture and they say yes.

One man stares hard at me and starts to complain. He waves me away but a passing villager tells him I have been visiting the village for many years and that I mean no harm.

I walk deeper into the village. I approach a farmer guiding an ox-drawn cart down a village lane. He stops the cart and asks me where I am from and how I came to be here.

I tell him an acquaintance from Long Wan took me here in 1990, and I have been visiting ever since.

I ask him if I can take his photo and he says he's not dressed well enough to have his picture taken.

I say there's nothing wrong with the way you're dressed. He shrugs and lets me take his picture.

I walk through the lowland fields but there is hardly anyone working today. There are just a few farmers weeding and watering rice plants.

The rice crops are almost ready for harvesting. They wave green and perfect in the wind.

I walk up to the village ancestral temple, approaching it cautiously because of what J said yesterday about visiting it without the villagers' permission.

I photograph it from the outside. I go up to the door and look inside. The village gods that used to rest on an altar inside are gone now.

They must only bring them out on special occasions…they must be afraid to leave them unattended in the temple.

I don't go inside the temple…I too must be a little wary of the consequences of ignoring the wishes of the villagers.

In the distance the new Zhanjiang cemetery rises along the horizon, altering the view from the lowland fields.

In the past, when I looked out on the lowland fields, the rice paddies stretched as far as the eye could see.

A woman working in a field beside the temple says the Zhanjiang government built the new cemetery on land it purchased from the village.

I follow a path above the lowland fields that leads to the Buddhist temple. Along the way I see many dogs wandering along the lanes.

In the past I never saw a dog in the village. I don't know if the dogs are kept for protection, food, or as pets.

Most of the dogs are tan-colored but here and there I see a black one. The dogs eye me suspiciously as I pass but they don't growl or bark at me.

The noonday sun beats down as I approach a huge gate and what I think must be the Buddhist temple.

When I was here five years ago the new temple was under construction, but the new building wasn't much bigger than the old one.

I walk through the gate and pass a group of men and monks who seem surprised to see me.

I am amazed by the transformation. There's a main temple and a smaller temple in front of it. The monks' living quarters are located in long buildings on either side of the temple.

I stop in the smaller temple to photograph statues of a laughing Buddha and the Bodhisattva Guanyin.

The temple's head monk approaches me and invites me to have lunch with him at the temple.

I'm not really hungry and don't want to inconvenience him but I accept his offer when he insists.

He takes me to the temple kitchen where a worker sets down a vegetarian meal in front of me.

The head monk, who is young and friendly, sits across from me and asks me questions in Mandarin as I eat.

A group of monks and nuns and a few temple workers gather around us as we talk.

They say I speak Mandarin well but I know they only think this because we are discussing simple subjects.

I don't have much appetite because of the heat. I can't finish all of the soup and rice and feel guilty for leaving it behind.

The head monk invites me to return to the temple the next time I am in Long Wan.

I thank him for his generosity and tell him I will be sure to visit when I return.

I pass through the temple gate and start down the road to the village. A motorcycle suddenly speeds through the temple gate and stops beside me.

The driver offers me a ride even though he already has someone riding on the passenger seat.

The monk must have sent him to give me a ride back to the village. I hesitate to get on the back but he insists, saying there is enough room for another person.

I climb on the back and a few minutes later am standing at the village gate.

*

My time in Long Wan is drawing to a close. The lanes and courtyards feel so empty now, almost abandoned.

I set off down the path in search of a few last images. I try to photograph a group of villagers in a small village store but they wave me off, saying they don't want me to take their picture.

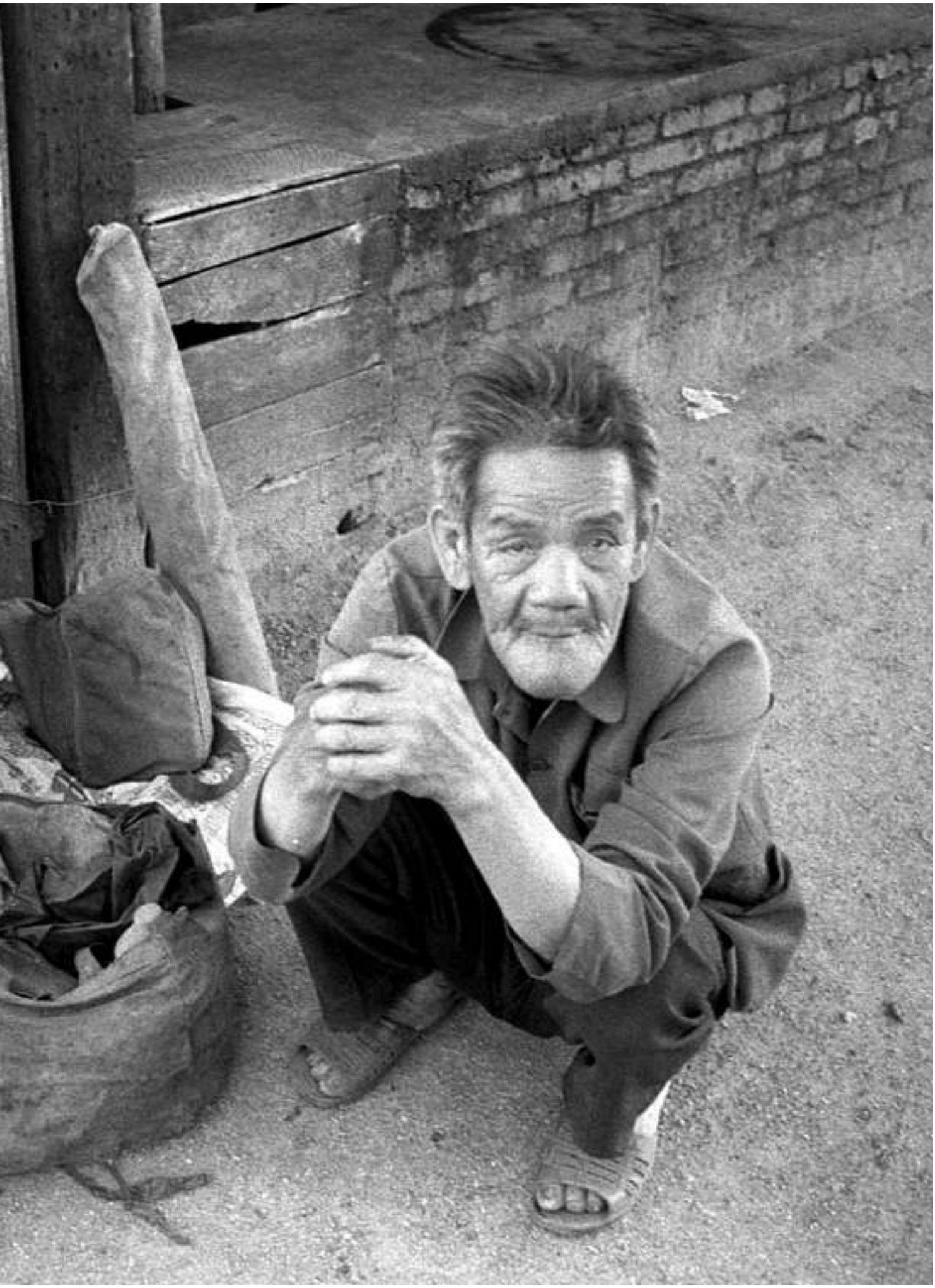
I walk my bicycle through the village gate. An old woman approaching in the distance starts to run when she sees my camera, almost tripping to avoid it.

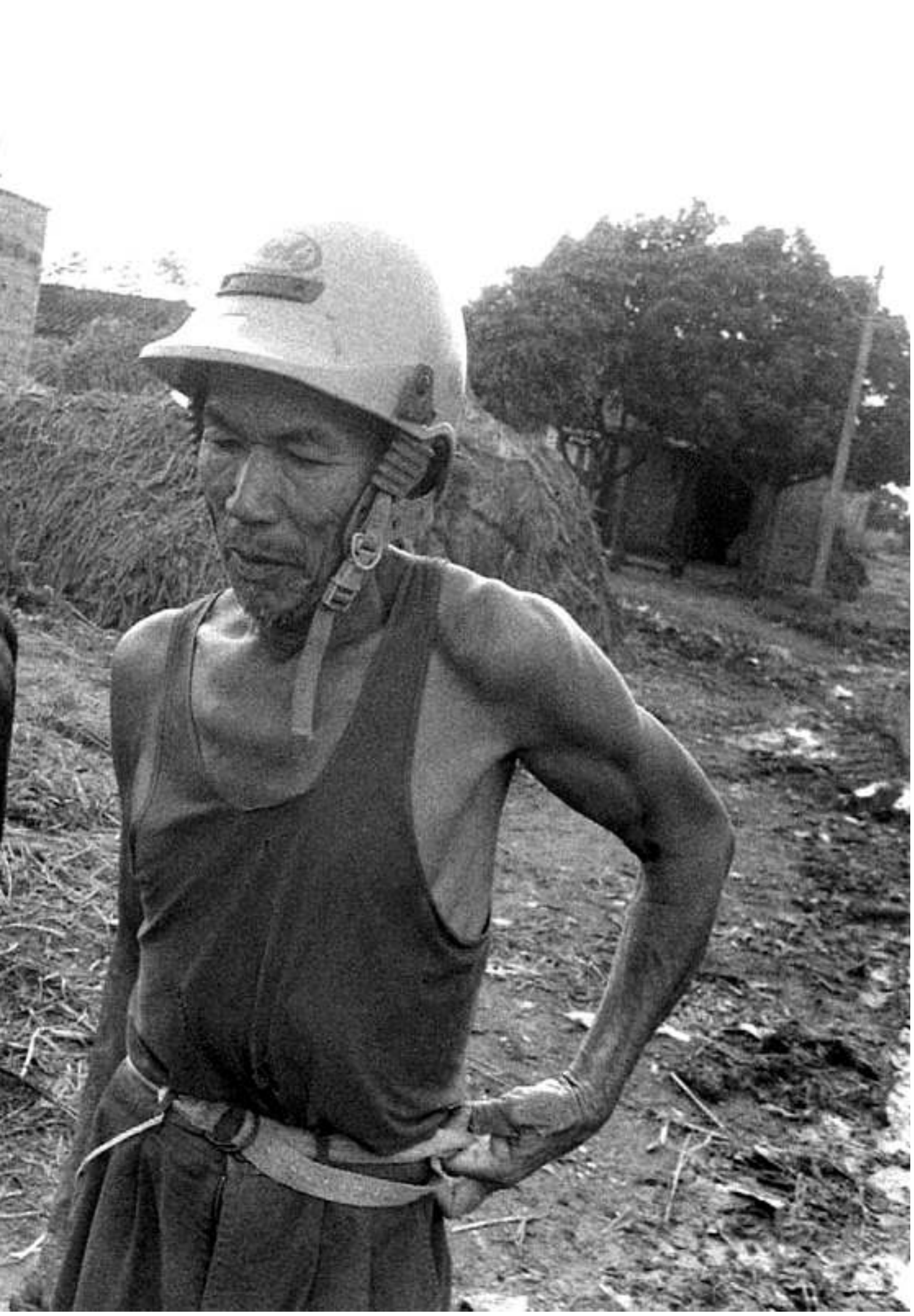
I climb on my bicycle and quietly leave the village. I feel like a ghost now. Most of the villagers who knew me when I first came here have disappeared. All I have now are my pictures, these bits and pieces of stories.

I ride past the cane fields toward Mao village. A schoolboy rides up behind me and calls out very quietly, Megelao, Meigelao (American ghost, American ghost).

I turn off the village road and head down the highway, unsure if I will ever come this way again.

October 23, 2005



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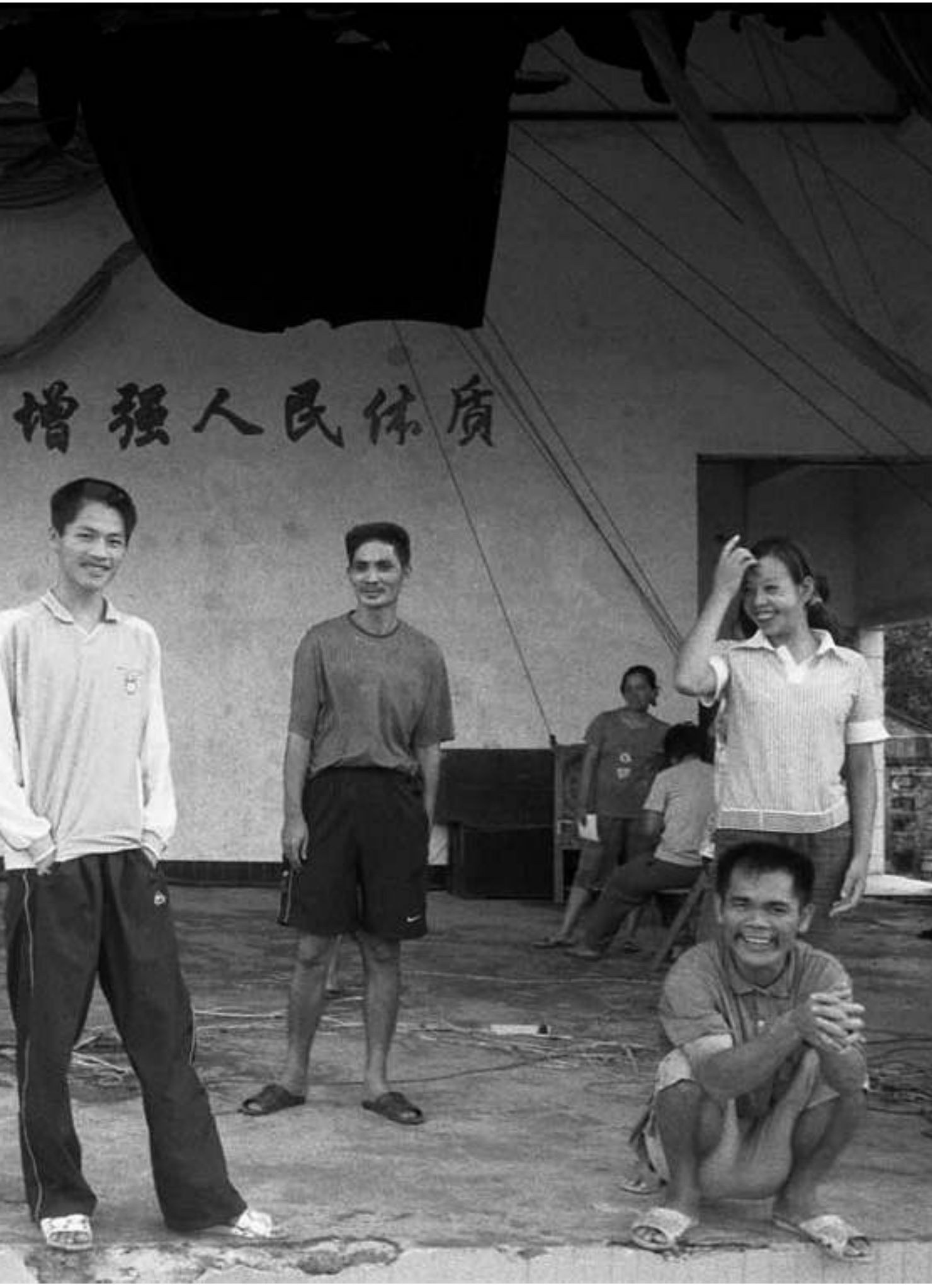
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